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ABSTRACT

A series of conferences with supervising teachers involving 10 female students training to be teachers of young children was examined. Conferences were conducted after the supervising teacher had observed the teaching of the students. All participating students were early childhood education majors involved in student teaching at least 25 hours per week. For each student teacher, a total of four conferences was tape-recorded. Each conference was conducted within the constraints of one of four different communication strategies, which varied in several ways. Two were controlled by the supervisor, two by the student-teacher. Two involved specific questions, two involved general questions. Affect, organization, reflectivity, and specificity differentiated the questioning strategies. Findings showed that when the supervisor functioned as a facilitator rather than a control agent, student-teachers engaged in longer, more positive conferences. Conferences including specific questions were longer and contained more reflective statements about instructional strategies and children's behavior than the conferences using the other three strategies. (RH)

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Brief Description:

One of the most important functions of the supervision process is the post observation conference. Many consider the conference as the heart of clinical supervision (Caruso, 1986). The success of the conference depends upon the clarity of communication. Four post observation conferences of ten student teachers were audiotaped. Four specific questioning strategies were used with all ten student teachers. Strategies varied in several ways. First, two strategies were supervisor controlled versus student-teacher controlled. Second, two had specific questions versus a general questioning format. Affect, organization, reflectivity, and specificity differentiated between the four questioning strategies. Results showed that student teachers engage in longer, more positive conferences when the supervisor functioned as a facilitator rather than a control agent. Conferences with specificity were longer, contained more reflective statements about instructional strategies and children behaviors than the other three strategies.

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Conference Communication with Student Teachers

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Introduction

Individuals with supervisory responsibilities range from executive directors in large agencies to those whose primary responsibility is to teach young children. Frequently, supervisors are program directors, education coordinators, university supervisors and consultants (Caruso & Fawcett, 1986). The number and variety of professionals in supervisory roles is enormous. A great deal of confusion lies in the multiple roles of the supervisor in early childhood. Frequently, the supervisor is the lead teacher or director who is experiencing tremendous stress and operating with little time, resources, or support. For example, Caruso and Fawcett (1986) delineate the role of head teacher into nine dimensions of responsibility!! The head teacher works with other teachers, parents, children, students, volunteers, auxiliary staff, aides, outside consultants, and education coordinators. One wonders when there will be adequate time for any quality supervision. One of the most important functions of the supervisor is the conference following the observation of a teacher.

It is the purpose of the present paper to present and suggest several effective strategies that will help increase the quality of the supervision process. Specifically, the strategies involve dynamics of communication between supervisor and the student teacher (Almy, 1975). Many consider the conference as the heart of clinical supervision (Caruso & Fawcett, 1986). It is the time when the supervisor and student teacher come together to jointly address problems or concerns. It is certainly an arena where communication skills shape, direct and determine the quality of professional exchange and growth. Others (Blumberg, 1974; Cogan, 1973) have described the "conference"

as a guarantee of systematic communication. Clearly, the success of the conference depends upon the clarity of communication.

Caruso and Fawcett (1986) have described four strategies of conference communication: 1) nonverbal communication, 2) active listening, 3) silence, and 4) asking questions. Whereas, Madeline Hunter (1978) in earlier work has described six types of supervisory conferences:

- 1) Type A Instructional Conference
Purpose: to identify, label, and explain the teacher's affective instructional behaviors giving research-based reasons for their effectiveness.
- 2) Type B Instructional Conference
Purpose: to stimulate the development of a repertoire of effective teacher responses so the teacher is not limited to those most frequently used.
- 3) Type C Instructional Conference
Purpose: to encourage teachers to identify those parts of a teaching episode with which they were not satisfied.
- 4) Type D Instructional Conference
Purpose: to identify and label those less effective aspects of teaching that were not evident to the teacher and to develop alternative procedures that have potential for effectiveness.
- 5) Type E Instructional Conference
Purpose: to promote continuing growth of excellent teachers.
- 6) Type F Evaluative Conference
Purpose: To summarize what has occurred in and a result of instructional conferences.

Needs for the Study

Given the importance of communication skills in conference, it seems important to explore questioning strategies in the post-observation conference of the student teacher. The student teaching field experience has been established and documented by many researchers (Peters, 1986; Katz, 1977; Silin, 1985) as a critical developmental stage for training teachers. For

many students, it is an intensive stress related period. Students attempt to apply in professional practice what they have learned in the academic setting. For many, this is not an easy task.

The value and necessity of the conference following the observation of the student teacher seems quite clear. It is an important time for the student and supervisor to evaluate and discuss issues, and effectively plan for potential growth. The success of the conference depends heavily upon the clarity of communication between the supervisor and the student teacher.

Communication between student teacher and the supervisor is a critical element of the learning process in teacher training. Through observation, the student teacher absorbs the strategies and procedures of an effective role model. But, it is through reflection and discussion between the supervisor and the student that specific teaching behaviors are identified, discussed, and assimilated by the student teacher.

Purpose of Investigation

The purpose of the study was to examine the post-observation conferences of 10 student teachers. Specifically, four questioning strategies were used with each student in efforts to analyze conference communication. Several questions were of concern. Does the student teacher verbalize more when they are in control of the conference? Are specific questions more effective than general ones in a conference? Do questions regarding learner behavior, rather than teacher behavior elicit long responses?

Methodology

The sample consisted of 10 preservice student teachers in early childhood education. All students teachers were females, and ranged in age from 18 to 25 years. All students were student teaching at least 25 hours per week and were majoring in Early Childhood Education. Procedurally, for each student, the conference (Cogan, 1973) was tape recorded. For each student teacher a total of four conferences were taped and four different communication strategies were utilized. Only one strategy was used during each conference. Conferences were not combined. Nine days passed between each conference. One strategy represented a focused conference controlled by the supervisor. The second was a focused conference controlled by the supervisor. The third strategy involved organizational issues, and was a student directed conference. Similarly, the fourth involved the student controlling the conference, but it reflective questions.

All four strategies shared three basic principles of supervision:

- (1) Teaching is behavior that can best be improved through analysis of the behavior.
- (2) Principles of learning that apply to students also apply to teachers.
- (3) The supervisor's conference should have a purpose.

The questions and issues of who is controlling the conferences distinguish between the following four strategies. Each strategy was used in the same order with all the student teachers.

I. Strategy One (Broad, questions, supervisor controlled)

Questions

- a. What did you learn about teaching?
- b. How did it go?
- c. How was your lesson?

II. Strategy Two (Focused on affect of student, supervisor controlled)

Questions

- a. How do you feel about your learners' behavior?
- b. How do you feel about your teaching strategy?
- c. How do you feel about the questions or materials you used in the lesson?

III. Strategy Three (Organization/goal focused, facilitated by supervisor, student controlled)

Questions

- a. Did your children understand your specific learning objectives?
- b. Do you believe you were organized for the children?
- c. Did you effectively plan for the lesson?

IV. Strategy Four (Specific, reflective/student teacher controlled)

Questions

- a. What did you like about your lesson? How would you change it to improve it?
- b. What skill areas were you hoping to develop in your learners?
- c. How did your learners feel about their learning experience?

Within each of the four strategies used, the supervisor's response focused on the behavior of the student teacher, rather than the person. Supervisory statements were based on observation rather than value judgments or inferences.

In addition, supervisory feedback was formulated such that a manageable amount of information could be assimilated. The purpose of the focus was to serve the needs of the student teacher, and not the supervisor. The questions were asked at the beginning of the conference following a brief greeting and verbal exchange. Clinically, each conference cycle followed the following format: (a) pre-observation conference (3-5 minutes), (b) observation phase (20-40 minutes, and (c) post-observation conference (10 to 40 minutes).

Taped conferences were analyzed in four areas:

1. Length of time of the conference.
2. Specific comments regarding teaching behavior.
3. Specific statements regarding learner's behavior.
4. Specific statements regarding change(s) in teaching behavior.

RESULTS

Results showed that the length of conference time varied across the 4 communication approaches. For strategy one conference time was from 3 to 12 minutes, whereas for the reflective, student controlled conference (strategy 4), conference time was 13 to 36 minutes.

Specific statements about teaching behavior were longer, and more positive for the student controlled conference in contrast to the supervisor controlled ones. Statements for the reflective student controlled conference were as high as 36. Whereas, for the focused supervisor controlled conference, teaching statements totaled nine.

Specific statements in learner were brief for both strategy one and two. Both both of these strategies the total number of statements totalled forty-seven. For strategy three and four, the total number of statements regarding learners was 123.

The results focusing on specific statements regarding changes in teaching behavior for strategy one were zero. For strategy two, fourteen statements were made regarding changes in behavior. However, for strategies three and four a total of 45 statements were verbalized regarding change in teaching behavior.

Summary

There are multiple ways for supervisors to improve their performance in a post observation conference. Like the student teacher, supervisors must systematically analyze and question their own behavior. Self analysis takes time. Audiotaping provides an accurate, very revealing record of the post observation conference.

There are many variables that prepare and build a successful conference. The clarity of communication between supervisor and student teacher frequently set the stage and critically influence the growth and success of the conference time. Through the conscious use of specific communication skills,

the supervisor has the opportunity to share and understand the growth of the student teacher.

The present study focused on four specific questioning strategies. Clearly the results support the belief that active listening and specific, meaningful questions evoked more positive communication and longer verbal responses of the student teacher. Reflective and student-teacher controlled conferences lasted longer, and contained more responses regarding their students and their teaching behaviors. Supervisor controlled conferences with general, vague questions elicited short responses and were brief as compared to the other conferences.

Certainly, structuring the conference, preparation, and climate are important ingredients for a successful conference. There are many factors that influence and determine the important growth of a student teacher. Clearly, the conference of such a professional practicum needs further examination for those in teacher training to help ensure the success of developing teachers.

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1/2771V